

From independent university collections to a *Wissenstheater*: an ambitious project at the Humboldt University of Berlin

CORNELIA WEBER*

Resumo

A Universidade Humboldt, em Berlim, possui mais de uma centena de colecções independentes, dedicadas a todas as esferas do conhecimento. A grande maioria dos objectos, contudo, é quase inacessível ao público em geral e, consequentemente, encontra-se pouco divulgada. Em 1995, um grupo de investigadores decidiu empenhar-se em tornar públicas estas colecções e tem desde então desenvolvido um intenso trabalho de divulgação, incluindo palestras, a concepção de uma base de dados, a exposição 'Teatro da Natureza e da Arte; Arca do Tesouro do Conhecimento' e seminários para estudantes. Nos últimos três anos, estes tesouros escondidos foram sendo continuamente apresentados ao público com grande sucesso. Actualmente, a Universidade Humboldt tem planos para construir um museu de ciência onde uma parte seleccionada destas colecções possa ser apresentada de forma permanente, sublinhando os pontos de contacto entre as diferentes disciplinas.

Abstract

The Humboldt University owns over one hundred separate collections from all spheres of knowledge. Most of them are scarcely accessible to the general public and thus not well known. Since 1995 a group of scientists is engaged in opening up and presenting these collections (public lectures, construction of database, exhibition 'Theatre of Nature and Art - Treasure-trove of Knowledge', seminars with students). In the last three years the hidden treasures were systematically and successfully presented to the general public. Now the Humboldt University is planning a science museum exhibiting a selection of the whole spectrum of collections and demonstrating the points of contact between the different disciplines.

Introduction

The University of Berlin was founded in 1810 by the Prussian monarch King Friedrich Wilhelm III and instituted by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who had previously led the reorganization of the Prussian

school system. Central to Humboldt's concept for the university was the close alliance of research and teaching, as well as scholarship for scholarship's sake and the development of personality. This became a model for several other universities founded throughout the world. Today, the former Berliner

* Cornelia Weber is lecturer at the Humboldt University and general manager of the Helmholtz Centre. Address: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: weber@mathematik.hu-berlin.de; <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/hzk>

Universität or Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität is called Humboldt-Universität in honor of the Humboldt brothers, Wilhelm and Alexander.

Outstanding individuals have shaped the history of this university. An incredible number of famous personages and Nobel Prize laureates have done research in Berlin, for example the physicians Rudolf Virchow and Robert Koch or the physicists Max Planck and Albert Einstein. Some of them have left behind important records relating to their achievements.

After the German unification in 1990, a list of assets circulated at the former East German Humboldt University. Included in these assets were several collections and museums. At the time nobody could have imagined that these collections would some day lead us to envision a *Wissenstheater*, or a science museum addressing the needs of the 21st century. This paper presents a case for the promotion and support of these academic collections. Firstly, there will be a short historical account of the early phase of this remarkable project, when an overview of existing collections needed to be acquired. In the second part, examples of coordinating activities and increasing audiences as a major prerequisite for further development will be examined. Finally, the recent initiative at the Humboldt University for a *Wissenstheater* will be described.

The collections

The founding of the university coincided with its acquisition of collections of the Prussian Academy of Sciences: the Botanical Garden, the Cabinet of Physics, the Scientific Collections, the Chemical Laboratory and the Observatory. This corresponded to Wilhelm von Humboldt's plan to allot everything

relevant to higher education to the university. Over the years many collections were added. However, in the midst of 1990's only a few of these collections, namely the Museum of Natural History, the Pathological Museum at the Charité, the Robert-Koch Museum, the Arboretum and the Forge Museum of the old Berlin Veterinary School, were really known beyond a small group of insiders. Only a few academics and their colleagues in their respective departments were cognizant of the existence of other collections at the university. There was no coordination.

This changed with the initiation of the project 'Opening up the collections of the Humboldt University', which was under the direction of Horst Bredekamp, Jochen Brüning and Cornelia Weber of the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik. Firstly, all available information in the archives and libraries and in the various departments within the university was systematically collected. The results were amazing: In a few cases, real treasures were brought to light whose existence was known to only a few. At the present time about hundred individual collections in the different fields of knowledge are known to have existed at the university over the last two centuries. Many have been lost – to war, restructuring or other like disasters. Some exhibits are physically at risk to this day. Furthermore, large parts of the existing collections are barely accessible. Despite these difficulties a large inventory encompassing every conceivable discipline has survived. This inventory still offers a wealth of unique objects and an incomparable insight into the history of science, particularly in the 19th century. These collections also reflect the major role played by Berlin in the development of modern academic disciplines. The total number of objects in the inventory is currently estimated to be more than 30 million. The collections

come from various sources, among them the Royal Art Cabinet founded in the 16th century.

The natural science collections are excellently presented within the walls of the Museum of Natural History, which was founded in 1889. Over 25 million objects in the museum guide one through more than 4.5 billion years of the development of the earth, of the planets and of life on the earth. The Museum of Natural History is thus one of the largest registration centers for the world's animate and inanimate nature. Previous to 1946 the Botanical Garden and the Botanical Museum were part of the university as

well, but today exist under the aegis of the Freie Universität Berlin. The Humboldt University also has a number of smaller scientific collections. They include the largest European collection of animal sounds with more than 100,000 recordings, the zoological teaching collection in the department of biology with valuable hand-made glass models from the 19th century of marine invertebrates, an arboretum, a collection of mathematical models and a collection of maps and rocks in the department of geography. The few remnants of the long-vanished Museum of Oceanography are now retained in the German Museum of Technology.



Fig. 1 – Centre of the exhibition 'Theatre of nature and art – Treasure-trove of knowledge' (Photo by Thomas Bruns © Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik).

Medical research at the Humboldt University is also excellently represented, for example by the collection of the institute of anatomy and the Museum of Pathology and Anatomy at the Charité, founded in 1899 by Rudolf Virchow. There are also several smaller collections such as an anthropological collection, the Robert-Koch Museum, a collection of forensic medicine, wax models, historical instruments in the department of physiology, skulls and articulators in the area of dentistry, the lost museum of hygiene, and several collections of veterinary medicine, including a forge museum with unique holdings of historical horseshoes.

The collections in the humanities are also highly varied, although they fall far short of the sheer volume of the scientific collections. The University library has some special collections of particular significance. These include the portrait collection, with about 2,200 artistic and photographic portraits of Berlin scholars, the scientific library of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm and the archive of the Sunday literary society "Tunnel over the Spree", which for a long time had Theodor Fontane as its secretary. Another outstanding feature is the collection of handwritten college notebooks with notes taken by students.

The tradition of the university is presented in the former so-called scholar's gallery, which was in the main hall of the university. Since 1836, it displayed busts of deceased professors who had made special contributions. These busts are today placed throughout the different departments. There are also four various archaeological collections: the collection of antiques, excavations from Mussawarat es Sufra in Sudan, a prehistoric collection, and the lost collection of a Museum of Christianity.

The sound archive contains 7,000 shellac records,

including about 4,500 early recordings comprising a substantial number of languages and dialects and voice recordings of famous personalities of German history such as Max Planck and the Emperor Wilhelm II.

These examples show that the collections present almost every field of knowledge and significant development in the history of science and the university in the 19th century. This short listing of collections also indicates both the enormous potential as well as the challenge that the ownership of these treasures has implied for the university.

Activities

An important incentive for the project was at the beginning of 1998 the Volkswagen Foundation Grant of 867,100 German Marks for a first inventory. Intended was not a conventional inventory of single items but rather an inventory of descriptions of the objects with a special view towards the points of contact between the several spheres. With this interdisciplinary goal in mind an image and sound database was developed, which is to be used by the laymen and the specialist, and which brings the heterogeneous collections together in a digital museum and reflects the historical, personal and institutional background of the objects.

Also in 1998 a lecture series was initiated with various speakers introducing individual collections to a broader audience. For the first time the different curators and conservators were invited to a common forum dedicated to the treasure-troves. This was a good chance to publicize the collections both inside and outside the university, to make the collections better known and to develop a network of people interested in supporting the project.

Due to these intensive public relations efforts, the media began to notice the project and several local and national reports followed. The growing interest was beneficiary to the collections: some department heads paid more attention to the respective collections and some scientists in charge of a specific collection were encouraged to ask for the securing and conservation of the objects.

When in 1998 our project group was invited to take part in the national millennium show in Berlin, the idea was conceived to exhibit selected objects from the different spheres. This was not realized. Instead we looked for funding for our own exhibition. In the spring of 2000, the Berlin Lottery Foundation granted 4.5 million German Marks, and, supported by a large number of colleagues from the whole university, we started implementing our concept.

The opening of the exhibition 'Theatre of Nature and Art. Treasure-trove of Knowledge'¹ took place on 9 December 2000 – eight months after the bestowal of the grant. The exhibition concept was based on the legacy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. This founder of the Prussian Academy of Sciences felt that scientific and fine arts exhibits should be displayed side by side to highlight these corner stones of culture. He wanted to create a *theatrum naturae et artis*, in which the objects weren't simply assigned systematic places, but were rather made to act as an organic associative complex and to address all human senses.

For the first time the Humboldt University presented on over 3,000 square meters the entire spectrum of its collections: more than 1,100 not just historically

significant but also visually striking objects culled from all spheres of knowledge. Most of the chosen exhibits bear witness to significant developments, great successes, and monumental errors in the cultural history of knowledge. The joint presentation of these objects from all disciplines revealed the numerous interconnections that link these ostensibly distinct subjects.

Throughout the entire run of the exhibition a coherent program of events with lectures, demonstrations,

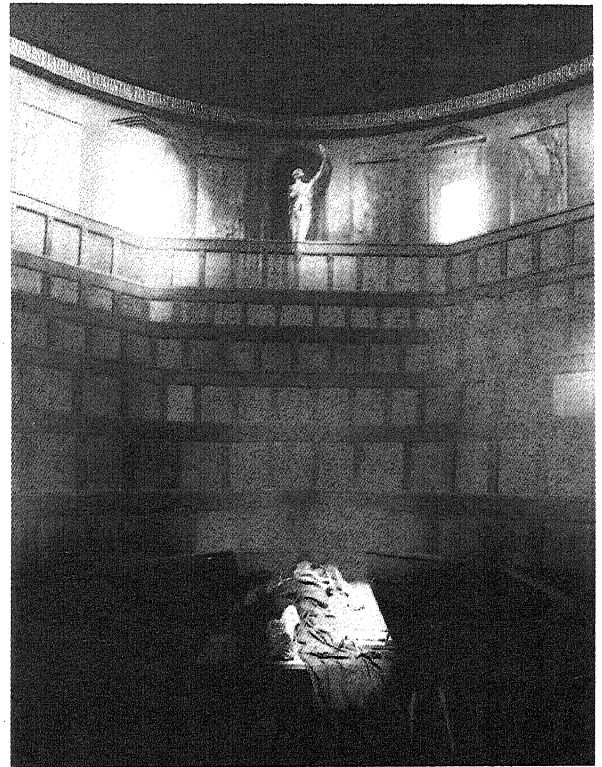


Fig. 2 – 'Theatrum anatomicum berolinense' as anamorphosis, created by Yadegar Asisi (Photo by Thomas Bruns © Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik).

¹ Catalogue's reference: H. BREDEKAMP, J. BRÜNING & C. WEBER (eds) 2000. *Theater der Natur und Kunst. Theatrum naturae et artis. Essays und Katalog*. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Henschel Verlag, Berlin.

theatrical readings, workshops for children, symposia and concerts added liveliness to the exhibition hall.

The exhibition was a great public success, to which 80,000 visitors and almost exclusively positive reactions from laymen, politicians and science managers was counted. The appeal of this *theatrum naturae et artis* originated from the fact that it stimulated an emotional response. Furthermore, several special events – framed as commentaries to the exhibits – provided plenty of opportunity for contact as well as for the exchange of knowledge and experience with the curatorial team, with scholars from within the university and with artists who presented their personal views. Thus, the theatre and all its activities could help people to get over the psychological barriers and atavistic fears so often generated by the mere concept of science.

A Wissenstheater

Currently there are many efforts in Germany towards the promotion of scientific research and the improvement of the public understanding of science. (In addition, the small numbers of young men and women choosing a career in the sciences is considered by many as a severe impediment for the health of a prospering economy.) There are, for example, special programs like 'days of research', 'the long night of science', 'summer of science' and so on. These events are certainly important and have positive effects. However, their long-term influence is expected to be rather limited, as they provide neither a permanent platform for a broader audience nor a genuine discourse with the public.

The wish to continue and extend the presented concept of the *Wissenstheater* is a natural reaction towards the need to promote scientific research on the one hand and the success of the exhibition on the other.

At this time there is a realistic chance to establish a permanent science museum in the reconstruction of the old city castle opposite the Altes Museum and in the close vicinity of the Museumsinsel (an island in the city center hosting various art museums), the seat of government, and last but not least, the Humboldt University. The addition of a science museum would lead to an extraordinary ensemble of cultural corner stones in the heart of Berlin as well as to a unique common bond between culture, politics, science, humanities and society.

The prospective museum, developed by the university and supported by the city, will be a fusion of university and museum, a *Wissenstheater*². The university, with its great variety of disciplines, its tremendous academic competence and its vitality, is a perfect director for this 'theatre', the academic collections are great actors and the students will be either diligent supporting actors or will form a grateful audience. A direct connection between Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of scholarship for scholarship's sake and the development of personality can be seen.

The stage is a key concept for the *Wissenstheater*. Sciences and humanities will create many different stages such as changing exhibitions as a background for present-day research discussions, lectures and

² Unfortunately, the translation 'theatre of knowledge' does not carry all of the connotations present in the German term.

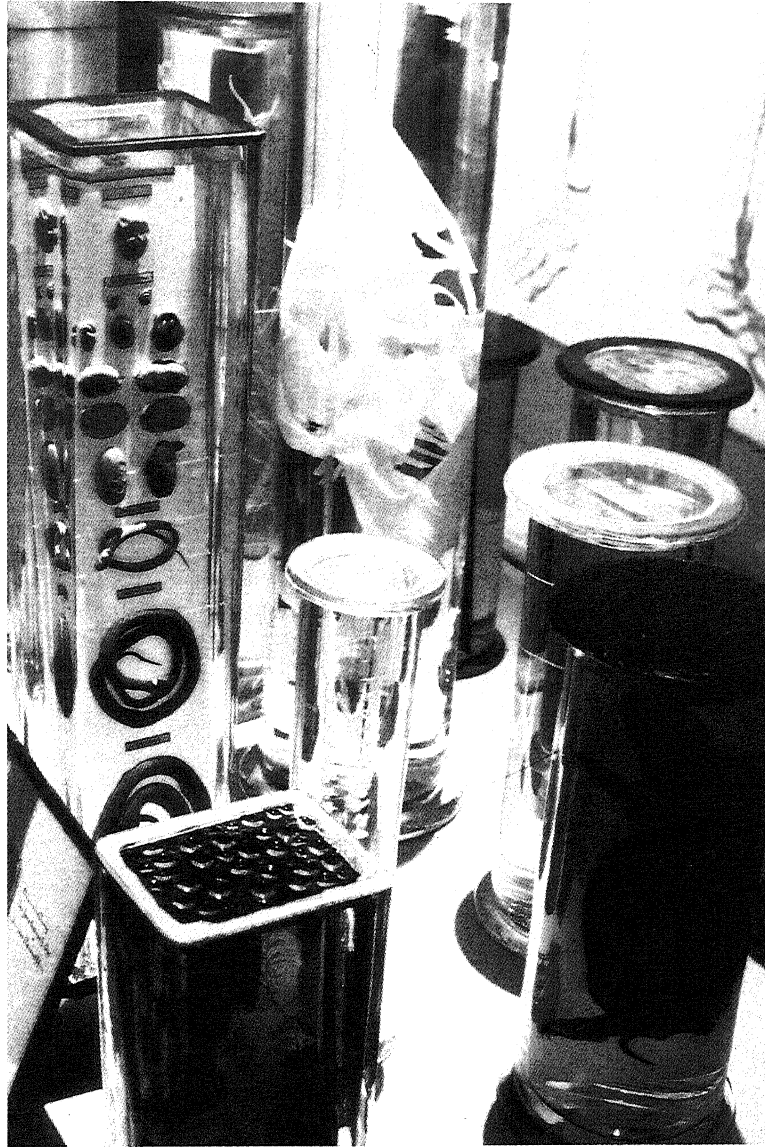


Fig. 3 – Specimens of the zoological teaching collection (Photo by Barbara Herrenkind © Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik).

debates, live demonstrations, experimental laboratories, modern communications technologies, and in particular the new media and also traditional theatre, theatrical readings and concerts.

Displaying the past is but one aspect of the responsibility of the *Wissenstheater*. Giving an orientation towards living in the present, with a clear orientation towards the future is also of importance. This implies displaying science in its cultural context,

with its protagonists, its motives and aims, its errors and successes. In this way people not only will be informed about science, but they also will find models and perspectives for their own life.

The Berlin *Wissenstheater* will be a venue for all people

interested in science and humanities. It addresses politicians, artists, people from the world of industry, scholars and journalists. But the most important audience will be the accidental visitor who shall find himself surprised to be drawn into the excitement of the sciences.